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ABSTRACT

Fur trade settlements in North America were a fertile environment for cultural education. The fur trade became a network of closely linked social spheres in which individuals had to acquire competence in order to function and survive. The Hudson Bay Company's decision to plant permanent posts on the shores of the Hudson Bay put settlers and their Indian trading partners into a new and dynamic set of relationships. Learning curves rose sharply as each side adjusted to the other. For the Indians, the trading posts represented a new social order, new economic values and commodities, and strange religious influences. For the European traders, the posts meant adjustment to a new geographic environment, diplomatic demands, and a changed governmental organization. Longterm developments included increased economic awareness on the part of the Indians and a changed socioeconomic hierarchical structure for the Indians and the European settlers. Ultimately, European settlers and Indians intermarried, forming a new society which was a specialized intersection and mutual adaptation of white and native social spheres. (LP)

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THE FUR TRADE AS AN ENVIRONMENT FOR EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATIONS FROM HUDSON BAY

by
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The Fur Trade as an Environment for Education: Problems and Implications from Hudson Bay

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The fur trade has not usually been thought of as an environment for education; we more often have viewed it primarily as the context for the exploration of northern North America, and as an economic system linking European commerce with Amerindian production. Yet its participants, white and native, adult and child, male and female, often found it the setting for intensely educational experiences, sometimes positive, sometimes negative and traumatic; and we lose sight of a critical aspect of the fur trade if we ignore the varied kinds of learning that went on in it. This discussion focuses upon some aspects of Hudson Bay fur trade history in particular, for a sampling of some of its educational-historical data and a look at their broad importance.

The act of trading in itself, even across ethnic boundaries, need not involve learning much about other peoples and ways. When Henry Hudson became the first known European to trade with an Indian in James Bay in 1611, the encounter was one of simple silent trade; communication occurred through gestures and artifacts (Francis and Morantz 1983:16). Even long continued trade does not necessarily familiarize the groups involved with one another in a more than highly specialized and superficial way. The late twentieth century is historically an extreme for the extent to which trading partners can avoid intense personal contact, relying instead on electronic banking and other forms of remote communication and control.

But even the intergroup contacts that develop in technologically simpler and face-to-face trading systems are not necessarily characterized by much mutal learning. The trader commonly becomes the stranger, cast in a restricted role that may require only the most rudimentary knowledge of the groups with which he deals, although challenged in varying degrees to discover and define the unknown and adapt himself to it (cf. Simmel in Park and Burgess 1921, Schuetz 1944).

In some parts of northern North America, however, the fur trade became a network of closely linked social spheres in which individuals had to acquire some competency if they were to function, or sometimes even survive, psychically and socially as well as economically. When the Hudson's Bay Company decided in the late 1600s to plant permanent residential posts on the Bay shores, it moved its personnel and their Indian trading partners into a new and dynamic set of relationships with one another, with important longterm consequences for all. On both sides, learning curves would have risen sharply for a while, as the local Indian traders adjusted to new kinds of socioeconomic ties, and as the Europeans adapted to an environment that was radically new to them both socially and geographically.

We lack the Indians' firsthand testimony on this early phase of the fur trade encounter. But we can make good inferences about what was most novel and strange to them. Much of the novelty came in the form of artifacts - guns, axes, kettles, beads, cloth - the trade goods themselves, which carried with them the need to learn the new use patterns that went with them. The debate is ongoing about how much change and dependency

these new objects engendered; there was probably much regional variability depending on local subsistence options, alternatives, and constraints. In their new study of the fur trade in eastern James Bay, Francis and Morantz argue that dependency was not automatic and that technological replacement "did not occur with equal speed and thoroughness among all Indian groups"; the degrees of the Indians' proximity to and work involvement in the life of the trading post were major variables (1983:61,64).

More imposing novelties, however, were the white traders' ships and the post structures themselves. Europeans had long been accustomed to what has been called the "carpentered world" of sawn lumber and stone construction and its accompanying conventions and patterns of visual perception (Segall, Campbell, and Herskovits 1966: 83-97). But in native Hudson Bay, carpentered spatial arrangements were completely novel; the beginnings of the Bay trade involved an encounter between two very different visual worlds. Ships would have been strange enough, not only for their squared timbers and planks, their sails, and metal fittings. But the posts themselves would have been stranger still. Their rigid structures, right angles, windows, and doors offered vivid contrasts to native dwellings, and to a local landscape that was untamed and unkempt to English eyes.

Most importantly, these physical post structures also represented the intrusion of a new social order, and of social and economic values quite foreign to Hudson Bay. They were sealed or sealable enclosures with latches and locks to keep people in or out. They laid year-round claim to the land they stood on, unlike the Indians' flexible and

seasonal lodgings which were easily erected and dismantled. Internally, their walls, buildings, and rooms served European needs for privacy, defense, and accumulations of goods and furs, needs formerly scarcely known in the Bay. They also reflected European hierarchy with their distinctions between the factors' and officers' quarters and those of the common men — concepts of rank foreign to northeastern North America. They symbolized in most concrete form the vast cultural and social differences between northern native and white Britisher.

Their cultural contents too were equally alien — not just the objects they held for trade, but also the equipment for writing and record-keeping— books, ledgers, maps, plans, and the like. As traders, the Indians would see their furs recorded and hear their debts and credits recapitulated from the books on an individualized basis new to their experience. They became aware of a transactional record that could be both consulted and manipulated. As frequent messengers among the posts and outposts, they also carried company mail packets and could view the recipients' responses, seeing in action the concrete effects of the written word. It is not surprising that when the would-be Cree prophet Abishabis began his new movement in 1842, he integrated into its symbolism not only an indigenous pictographic tradition, along with the syllabic writing system that the Methodist missionary James Evans had just introduced in the area, but also the use of maps or charts said to show "the track to Heaven" (Brown 1982). The cultural synthesis represented by this movement was, in part, a consequence of many decades of Indian self-education in the ways of European fur traders and in the trade as a cultural and symbolic system.

On the subject of initial European perceptions of Hudson Bay and its natives, more evidence exists from the first hand testimony of early company men. The first officers who conducted the Bay trade had no backlog of comparable experiences to draw upon. It is clear from the remarks of HBC field governor John Nixon in 1682, for example, that his models for coping with the natives and for building and regulating posts were military ones extrapolated from what he knew of European enterprise in the East Indies (Brown 1980:14-15). Similarly, the company's founders in London conceptualized their traders' relations with Amerindians as if they were dealing with native states, or at least chiefdoms, with which formal, high-level diplomatic agreements could be made, not recognizing that their suppliers of furs would view trade as a matter of personal friendship/kinship modes of interaction rather than exchanges of flags and treaties.

The Britishers' models for establishing a way of life in the Bay came, of course, not only from a foundation of imperial experiences in other parts of the world, but also from England itself. It is a certainty that when in May of 1670, Charles II granted to the "adventurers" trading into Hudson Bay the "sole trade and commerce" of an area encompassing "all those Seas Streightes Bayes Rivers Lakes Creekes and Soundes...together with all the Landes and Territoryes upon the Countryes Coastes and confynes of the...aforesaid," he and they had no conception of the magnitude of territory and distances involved — of the fact that the Hudson Bay drainage system covers 1,379,160 square miles (Rich 1967:3). The dimensions of North American bays and watersheds were

not readily imagined by Englishmen of 1670 whose domestic frames of reference were the Thames or the shores of the English Channel. Nor were the power and amplitude of those northern waterways easily pictured by Londoners. In 1811, field officer William Auld found it necessary to remind his superiors of their contrasts with English waters as he argued the need for experienced servants. Writing to the company's London Committee, he entreated them to "dismiss from your mind the spancaly-dressed wherry-man with his plush breeches and his silver badge nor conceive the descent of the solitary bargeman at London Bridge with that through the shallow horrors of rocky chasms as at all synonimous. Here the slightest mistake is big with fate allow a wrong impulse and the vessel is overwhelmed in an instant" (HBC Archives A.11/118, fos. 22-23).

It was equally challenging for Britishers to make sense of the native groups whom they encountered in the subarctic. England was a hierarchy of administrative units — counties, parishes, etc. — clearly bounded, with codified laws, jurisdictions, and land titles. The parish church served the religious, social, and record-keeping needs of a local population residing, for the most part, no more than a mile or two distant. People were not immobile, but a family's geographical mobility commonly consisted of moving no more than five or ten miles at a time to points no more than two or three parishes away. For Englishmen accustomed to this small, structured world, the spatial ranges and land use patterns of northern Indians were foreign indeed. Whatever may have been the extent to which the natives defined and possessed individual hunting territories (a debated subject; for a recent discussion see Francis and Morantz 1983; 95-98), the European concepts of private land ownership and boundaries, of walls

and fences and of buying and selling land were essentially alien to Indian ideas of usufruct - maintaining land rights over a wide area only through continued or recurrent seasonal use of natural resources. Similarly, white and Indian diverged in their assumptions about what true land use consisted of. At the roots of many Indian land rights debates, old and new, are the basically different world views of the hunter/gatherer who finds support from the products of an untamed landscape and the intensive agriculturalist who controls and remakes the earth to yield domesticated crops.

The Hudson Bay fur trade setting was, then, one in which all parties involved confronted a need to learn new ways and understand strange peoples with very few guidelines to help them. Possibilities for mistakes were vast, and company officers sometimes made serious ones, as in the sequence of events leading to the Henley House massacre of 1755 (Bishop 1976). Nonetheless, the company, in developing the options open to it, managed to do some things right, in terms of both education and management.

Within two decades after the first establishment of its year-round posts, the company began to take on young apprentices — boys of twelve or fourteen — for initial terms of seven years, drawing them from such places as charity schools and parish poor rolls. The youth of these employees made them more adaptable than the older men whom it had hired at first, and some proved quick to learn both the physical and intellectual skills the company required, as well as developing some command of Indian languages. During long winter months, the posts offered self-contained

settings in which officers could transmit necessary writing and numbers skills to younger hands, while the trading season and spring and fall goose hunts afforded short periods of fairly intensive contact with the Indians. Some young men rose with enthusiasm to chances to be among the Indians despite company efforts at rather strict control; "the Boy Henry Kelsey", later a prominent officer and explorer, was said in 1689 to be "a very active lad, delighting much in Indians company, being never better pleased than when he is travelling amongst them" (Doughty and Martin 1929: XIII).

Boys such as these, often poor or orphaned, had strong incentives to pursue a company career as affording more success, security, and even long-term social companionship than they might have received at home where their resources, social ties, and prospects for upward mobility were all few. An interesting feature of the Hudson's Bay Company in its first century is the extent to which it began to bring up its own officers from youth — men who rose, at times, from even the lowest ranks to be factors or district governors strongly committed to the company.

There are some parallels between these boys and another major constituent of company personnel — the Orkneymen who began to serve in the Bay in the early 1700s and became numerically dominant by the 1780s. The Orkney Islands north of Scotland, being themselves poor in resources, early began to provide a reliable source of workers to company ships when they stopped at Stromness for final supplies for the voyage to Hudson Bay. Many Orkneymen put in long terms of service, becoming proficient in needed "county" skills, and a few became prominent officers.

Over the years, then, company recruiting patterns built up a substantial body of servants who were experienced in the special domain of past life in Hudson Bay.

Among the Indians, some parallel longterm developments occurred. On the technical side, Indian traders learned the extent to which they could bargain for more or better goods for their furs; Ray and Freeman in their aptly titled book, Give us Good Measure (1978), have shown that the Indians became sophisticated manipulators of the terms of trade whenever conditions allowed. Native social organization also responded innovatively to the challenge of the fur trade. While the company exercised initiative in choosing and rewarding Indian trade leaders as "captains" with special privileges and presents, the natives themselves took an active role in developing the social infrastructure behind these men and granting them the means to achieve captaincy. Toby Morantz has analyzed the trading captain system in James Bay as the native people's own "mode of adaptation to the fur trade...a task-oriented group which was grafted onto the existing and more traditional social system" (Francis and Morantz 1983: see also Morantz 1983). The fur trade had its aspiring, dynamic, and successful apprentices among the Indians as well as the Europeans.

Indian groups not only adapted to the European presence and the opportunities it offered; they also profoundly changed the personal lives of many white traders, with implications unrealized at the time. To native communities, the arrival amongst them of adult male traders with no wives or children was a startling phenomenon, reflecting as it

did a career specialization and a subordinating of familial to company interests that were completely foreign to indigenous life. The Europeans' lack of families was also disconcerting in that it meant there were no ready means to establish the kinship bonds that Indians viewed as so necessary a part of trade relations -- no children to adopt, daughters to marry, or wives to exchange. Indian traders made continuing efforts to correct the situation, and often prevailed upon reluctant or lonely or opportunistic whites to accept native female companionship, despite HBC rules enjoining employees to maintain social distance from Indians and particularly from Indian women. By the late 1700s, unions with native women "according to the custom of the country" were endemic among HBC traders, although variable in intent and seriousness, and both the posts and the dominantly Cree "Homeguard Indian" bands around them contained substantial numbers of fur trade offspring of mixed descent.

It is this development in particular that is most rich in problems and implications from a history of education perspective. Not many decades after James Isham first observed in 1743 that these offspring were becoming "pretty Numerous," increasing numbers of decisions were having to be made about the upbringing, socialization, and enculturation of these young people as a group. Their [redacted] presence showed the fur trade up for what it was not, it was never a full-scale society that could succeed very well in a basic mission of societies -- bringing up, placing, and replacing its own members internally over the generations, in a reasonably secure and self-contained environment. Traders and Indians had learned to adapt to one another; white apprentices and Indian trading gangs and captains learned the skills and social roles needed to keep the trade going, in a many-faceted interchange and interaction

of social spheres that can still use further study from a history of education perspective. But no regularized agency, even familial, received adequate support to take consistent care of fur trade youth, although the Hudson's Bay Company did at times confront the problem in a partial, ad hoc way.

In the mid to late 1700s, the company experimented on a small scale with allowing certain officers to bring home native dependents, usually when they took retirement or leave. Such transplantations were not easy, however, and the company had concerns about the costs and trouble of caring for such offspring in the event of a father's death — a problem it confronted in the instance of officer Robert Pilgrim in 1750. The other alternative for a departing employee was to return Bay dependents to their Indian relatives, a course which was chosen by some as kinder or at least more expedient. Some men would certainly have wished, in this instance, to remain in the Indian country in order to stay with their families. But HBC policy forbad former employees to remain in the company territories where they might burden the posts as a dependent population or try to set themselves up in private trade. The consequence was the almost systematic decapitation and fragmentation of native families — the regular removal of husband-fathers, often before the familial cycle was completed and the children grown up. Since the marriages had not been christianized and the children's legitimacy was problematic in British eyes, sanctions against familial breakup were all the weaker, although numerous company men felt great pain at the separations they were obliged to suffer. Fortunately, there seemed to be a tolerance and coping with

the situation on the Indian side. European traders' native family members regularly returned to live as Indians among their "Homeguard" relatives; in these instances, Indian women who had taken white husbands could clearly retain Indian status, exhibiting a pattern that later regulations have not taken as a model.

The background and data behind the matters raised in this paper have been amply presented in larger studies (e.g., Brown 1980, Van Kirk 1980), which also take into account the rather different complexities of North West Company conditions. For the purposes of a history of education perspective, two main points may be drawn from the text presented here. First, such a perspective, in its broadest sense, is a valid and important one in its contribution to fur trade social history. The full story of the fur trade is not told until we look at the learning processes, both white and Indian, that were initiated in its early days and their gradual elaboration toward custom and institution.

Second, a history of education perspective on this era has a larger importance in that it helps furnish a test of the fur trade as a social entity, raising basic questions about how to conceptualize it. Insofar as the fur trade "broke down" as a context for regularized socialization and enculturation, or exhibited discontinuities and fragmentation of familial life, it was not an effectively ongoing society. And as such, it was all the more vulnerable when settlers and missions encroached upon it in the 1820s.

It is true that the traders had before 1820 achieved a homogeneity of pattern in taking native wives and fathering ever-growing families in the Indian country (Brown 1976)—a pattern known as marriage according to the custom of the country. But they and their companies had failed to

attain a consensus about what that custom entailed in the way of longterm obligation and as a legal form; the founding of new societies (colonies) was not their business or purpose. Significantly, many HBC fathers welcomed the setting of Red River Colony for the "asylum" it could ultimately afford them and their native dependents. But once founded, it had a dynamic of its own, and a rather counter-fur-trade one at that. Ultimately, the changes of the early to mid 1800s showed the fur trade up for what it was - a specialized intersection and mutual adaptation of white and native social spheres that did not coalesce into a unified, self-perpetuating socializing and educative entity for its rising and numerous progeny.

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